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EDUARDO H. DINIZ DE FIGUEIREDO
Arizona State University, Tempe
MATTHEW J. HAMMILL
Arizona State University, Tempe
DAISY E. FREDRICKS
Arizona State University, Tempe

Marginalizing TESOL: Preservice Teacher Training in Arizona

This pilot study investigated the attitudes of preservice teachers at a major university in Arizona concerning the Structured English Immersion (SEI) program that is now being used with English language learners (ELLs). Using a survey, we examined how preservice teachers feel about potentially working with ELLs in this SEI context. We focused on their beliefs about language teaching and learning, including their perceived level of preparation to work with ELLs, their attitudes toward them, and the difficulties they anticipate in teaching ELLs in the future. The results show that preservice teachers lack some of the fundamental knowledge necessary to work with ELLs, and they highlight the importance of incorporating the insights of the larger TESOL field into K-12 teacher-training programs. We argue that K-12 teacher-training programs, especially in states with English-only policies, may be serving to marginalize the TESOL profession and the contributions it may provide to the education of ELLs.

Introduction

In the 2008-2009 fiscal school year, the state of Arizona served 150,078 K-12 students classified as English language learners (ELLs) (Arizona Department of Education, 2009). How to best educate this robust and diverse ELL population has been a highly debated topic, especially in recent years with the passing of Proposition 203 in November of 2000. This established an English-only policy in the state. The intent was to ensure all ELL students were proficient in English and could meet or exceed the high demands of a challenging education without the lack of English language proficiency impeding their academic progress.

In 2006, an ELL Task Force was established in the state with the aim of planning and implementing a language-learning program that would expedite English language acquisition for ELL students. This task force had to produce a program that developed English language acquisition and complied with all federal and state mandates. The result of its efforts was a Structured English Immersion (SEI) model that established a minimum of 4 hours per day of English language development (Arizona Revised Statutes 15-756.01, 2000) in which ELLs are segregated from mainstream classes.

Several studies have addressed the consequences of these restrictive language policies in Arizona. Crucial concerns and criticism have focused on the lack of substantial research to support the 4-hour model (e.g., August, Goldenberg, & Rueda, 2010; Krashen, Rolstad, & MacSwan, 2007), the existing gap between the academic achievement of ELLs and that of mainstream students (e.g., Losen, 2010; Mahoney, MacSwan, Haladyna, & García, 2010; Rumberger & Tran, 2010), the inadequate testing practices in the state for reclassification purposes (e.g., Mahoney, Haladyna, & MacSwan, 2009), the legality of restricting educational opportunity for ELLs (e.g., Losen, 2010), and the consequences that early reclassification may have on the educational experiences of ELLs and on the schools that serve them (e.g., Artiles, Klingner, Sullivan, & Fierros, 2010; Wright, 2005).

However, one issue that still deserves more attention in regards to the SEI model in Arizona is the impact it has on teachers and teacher education and on the status of the teaching profession in the state. According to Gándara and Orfield (2010), "Teachers have felt confused and disheartened by these policies" (p. 222), which have affected them "in sometimes dramatic, and often discomforting ways" (p. 217). As de Jong, Arias, and Sánchez (2010) explained, the current policies in Arizona have been detrimental to the teachers themselves and to teacher education for two main reasons. First, there is the "watering down of the curricular requirements" (p. 122) to become highly qualified to teach ELLs. In the SEI endorsement, preservice teachers need only 90 hours (6 credits) in order to be eligible and supposedly capable to work with ELLs. The previous requirement was a minimum of 360 hours (24 credits) to earn either an English as a Second Language (ESL) or a Bilingual Education (BLE) endorsement. Second, "the Arizona Department of Education has usurped the authority of faculty to determine what and how to teach in the preparation of teachers for English learners" (p. 124). Instead, teacher preparation is established by the Arizona Department of Education (ADE), and "over half of the SEI curriculum is allocated to a review of English-only strategies" (p. 124).

De Jong, Arias, and Sánchez (2010) stated that the current system "fails to prepare future teachers adequately" (p. 130), and that the Arizona case shows the importance of paying attention to preservice teacher preparation. Gándara and Orfield (2010) also addressed the issue and claimed that there needs to be an effort "to determine what the skills are that make a teacher highly qualified to teach English learners. Evidence suggested that these skills are not what are being taught in many credentialing and certification programs" (p. 224).

In light of this political and educational climate, this pilot study investigated preservice teachers' attitudes about potentially working with ELLs under the SEI model in Arizona. The objective was to examine preservice teachers' knowledge about language teaching and learning, including their perceived level of preparation to work with ELLs, their attitudes toward them, and the difficulties they anticipated in teaching second language learners in the future.

Methods

Data were collected from preservice teachers enrolled in a course titled

Understanding the Culturally Diverse Child at a major university in Arizona. The participants were taking this course as part of their preparation to become K-12 certified teachers, and 177 students from 10 sections of this course were solicited by e-mail and invited to participate in a survey. Of all invitees, 24 students responded, but 3 did not finish the entire survey. The survey contained a total of 30 questions, both multiple-choice (23) and open-ended (7). In this report, we focus on the 7 open-ended questions, which best highlight issues related to preservice teacher training and the nature of professionalism in TESOL. The seven questions are:

1. What language(s), if any, other than English do you speak?
2. What language(s) do you mostly speak at home?
3. What does being fluent in a language mean to you?
4. In your own words how do you define an ELL?
5. What do you think are the most important skills required to teach English?
6. What difficulties do you anticipate if you teach ELLs in the future? and
7. In a few words, summarize your opinion about the SEI model that is currently in place in the state of Arizona.

Recurrent themes related to our objectives were identified. The responses to each question were analyzed individually based on these themes, and then categorized accordingly.

Results and Discussion

Four out of 23 participants responded that they spoke a language other than English. However, only one of 23 stated that he or she spoke a language other than English at home. These results showed that the preservice teachers who responded to the survey were a largely monolingual English-speaking group. We acknowledge that the sample size was not large enough to make generalizations, yet if these numbers reflect the overall preservice teacher population in Arizona, ELLs in the state will have fewer chances to have teachers from their language communities and instruction in their primary language, which have been considered beneficial (Gándara & Orfield, 2010). Therefore, more research is needed into the demographics of preservice teachers. This information would also help to design more effective teacher-training programs, where possible differences in existing knowledge and attitudes about language learning between monolingual and multilingual student teachers would be taken into account.

The question "What does being fluent in a language mean to you?" elicited three distinct categories of response. The first category included responses that emphasized the belief that fluency corresponded to knowing how to speak *correctly* and *properly*. Examples of typical responses in this category included: "... converse perfectly in a language ..." and "... fully speak a language and have proper conversations with others... ." The second category emphasized *the ability to communicate*, and responses included: the ability to "carry on a conver-

sation with little or no difficulty," and "being able to communicate with more people." The third category emphasized that fluency equated with *sophistication* or *intelligence* of language use. Typical responses included "carrying on a complex conversation" and "carry on an intelligent conversation."

From these responses it is clear that preservice teachers have formed nascent ideas about fluency, but their responses did not show strong evidence of awareness of how it is discussed in the TESOL field; there was no mention of communicative or pragmatic competence or other terms used by TESOL professionals. This is understandable, as preservice teachers would not be expected to know and use these terms. However, based on the limited amount of time spent in teacher training, and the lack of depth in the curriculum itself (de Jong, Arias, & Sánchez, 2010; Gándara & Orfield, 2010), it is possible that preservice SEI teachers in Arizona will not have the opportunity to gain knowledge from the TESOL field about not only the definition of fluency, but also many other concepts in second language acquisition and language pedagogy. This is detrimental not only to preservice teachers, but also to how the TESOL field is represented in the teacher-training process; if future K-12 teachers are not exposed to the ideas of leading scholars in the TESOL field, they will not likely develop an appreciation for the field itself. This is particularly problematic in the context of current ideologies surfacing in the politics of Arizona and the practices of the ADE, such as instructing school districts to remove teachers who are deemed to speak heavily accented or ungrammatical English.

Although the participants provided reasonable definitions of an ELL, their answers demonstrated limited knowledge about the skills required to teach English. Two categories of responses were elicited concerning these skills: *patience and tolerance* and *knowledge of students' language*. Issues related to effective language pedagogy were not reflected in preservice teachers' answers. Again, given the limited nature of the SEI training model in Arizona, it is questionable whether these future teachers will have enough time and opportunity to really be capable of effectively working with ELLs after completing the short preservice training curriculum. In addition, it is noteworthy that the preservice teachers indicated that knowledge of ELLs' other languages is important, especially considering that Arizona is an English-only state that has deemphasized bilingual education.

The perception that a lack of proficiency in the students' L1 would be problematic was also reflected in the responses to the question, "What difficulties do you anticipate if you teach ELLs in the future?" The majority of responses dealt with the language barrier; a typical response in this category was the fear of teacher and student "not being able to understand each other." Again, this showed the importance of having teachers who can communicate in the students' native languages (Gándara & Orfield, 2010). Future studies may seek to understand how preservice teachers feel about communicating with students in English-only classrooms, and whether they see proficiency in languages other than English as a necessary skill for teachers of ELLs.

Finally, the preservice teachers who participated in our survey predominantly viewed the current SEI model unfavorably, mentioning that the 4-hour

block led to the separation of ELL students from mainstream students, which was harmful to ELL students' social inclusion, academic learning, and their development of English proficiency. This negative feeling toward the model may affect their experiences in teacher-training courses as well as their future professional practices. If future studies confirm this negative attitude toward the SEI system, this will be useful knowledge in the needs-analysis process of designing courses for teacher training.

Conclusion

The results of this pilot study resonate with previous articles that defend the need for more research about preservice teachers (de Jong, Arias, & Sánchez, 2010; Gándara & Orfield, 2010). More specifically, we emphasize the necessity to understand the knowledge and beliefs that future teachers have about aspects of language teaching and second language acquisition in order to fully understand how teacher-training curricula can address these issues in ways that are consistent with both student needs and current research in TESOL, SLA studies, and Applied Linguistics.

The current model in Arizona for K-12 SEI teacher training is not adequate in providing sufficient knowledge about second language acquisition and pedagogy. This furthers the idea that teaching ELLs does not require substantial skills or knowledge but rather is something that anyone can do with minimal preparation. This is a disservice not only to students who need high-quality English language instruction, but also to the TESOL profession; if teachers who will work with ELLs are not seen as possessing important and unique knowledge and skills, TESOL will not be seen as a unique academic field, and it will not be accorded the privileges and benefits that other academic disciplines receive.

It is important for preservice teachers to be made aware of the larger TESOL field as an academic discipline, and how it embodies an extensive base of knowledge and experience that should serve as the foundation for teacher training. Members of the TESOL field should continue to build bridges with K-12 policy makers to ensure that insights from the field are being taken into account by those who make policy decisions affecting ELLs. Encouraging more influence from the TESOL field on preservice K-12 ESL teacher education would be instrumental not only in improving the learning experiences of students, but also in helping policy makers see TESOL as a legitimate area of academic inquiry worthy of appreciation, respect, and support.

Authors

Eduardo H. Diniz de Figueiredo is a PhD student in Applied Linguistics at Arizona State University. His interests lie in the areas of critical applied linguistics, ESL education, language policy, language ideology, and English as an international language.

Matthew Hammill is a PhD student in Applied Linguistics at Arizona State University. His interests lie in the areas of second language writing, adult ESL, language policy, and critical applied linguistics.

Daisy E. Fredricks is a PhD student in Applied Linguistics at Arizona State University. Her interests lie in the areas of educational linguistics, ESL education, language minority education, and preservice teacher education.

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